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Implications of the downing of KAL 007

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KAL FLIGHT 007
The Hidden Story
Oliver Clubb
The Permanent Press. 182 pp. $16.95

BLACK BOX
KAL 007 and the Superpowers
Alexander Dallin
University of California Press. 130 pp. $14.95

Reviewed by
Dick Polman

It is a cloak-and-dagger saga that seems straight out of the pages of an Ian Fleming novel, but one doubts whether even James Bond could have pierced the mystery surrounding the tragic downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 by Soviet fighters.

The incident, which took place shortly before dawn on Sept. 1, 1983, plunged the Cold War into a new ice age. The precise circumstances leading to the deaths of 269 innocent passengers have never been determined, largely because much salient material remains classified. But this lack of data has served only to spark the curiosity of various analysts, academics, polemicists and conspiracy buffs, all of whom are free to tap a lucrative American market. The fact remains that even amid the anti-Soviet hysteria of September 1983, more than 60 percent of surveyed Americans doubted that their government had told the full story.

Now we have two early entrants in the Whodunit Sweepstakes. *KAL Flight 007: The Hidden Story* is a political scientist's entertaining attempt to prove, through some breathtaking leaps of logic, an American-orchestrated conspiracy to spy on Soviet defense installations. *Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers*, by Alexander Dallin, is a Soviet specialist's sobering look at how both superpowers have tried to exploit a shocking tragedy for their own narrow purposes — at the expense of truth.

A few facts are beyond dispute. The Soviets shot the plane down, although they took their time admitting it. The Americans were, at the time of the downing, conducting an intelligence operation against the Soviet military installations in that region. The plane was way off course and apparently made no effort to correct its course.

At this point, however, the two books take divergent paths. Dallin's book — the better of the two — tries to weigh all theories, regardless of their ideological implications, before finally acknowledging the absence of a smoking gun. Even when discussing the plane's puzzling flight path, Dallin concludes, "It is well to remember that it [the answer] need not be the most plausible or the most rational explanation that corresponds to the truth; history is a fickle mistress, and logic may at times be a poor guide."

Accordingly, writes the Stanford University professor, "given the political explosiveness of the issue, it is especially important not to jump to the conclusion that the whole thing was engineered by the United States unless there is good evidence to sustain this view." He doesn't deny that the plane could have been enlisted to penetrate Soviet air space in order to give the West a chance to watch the Soviet air defense in action. But he doubts that "a jury of dispassionate historians or fellow citizens" would draw such a conclusion, based on the available evidence.

Syracuse University professor Oliver Clubb, on the other hand, starts with such a premise and works in reverse. His prose is far punchier, and the American villains in it wear black hats. It could well be true, Soviet paranoia aside, that Uncle Sam's fingerprints were on that plane. But to believe it, one must be willing to indulge the string of suppositions that animate *The Hidden Story*.

Take, for example, the way Clubb seeks to prove a sweetheart relationship between Korean Airlines and the CIA. He cites an anonymous intelligence source, recycled from a story in a San Francisco newspaper, who said the United States uses commercial airliners for intelligence purposes. Then he adds, "It should not be surprising if KAL, through the KCIA [Korean intelligence] as well as the South Korean Air Force, were also discovered to have connections with U.S. intelligence."

It should not be surprising. Clubb's book is replete with conditional qualifiers that undercut his own firm convictions: "There are grounds for suspecting" and "it could well be" that the CIA created KAL. "It seems evident that" KAL flew U.S. intelligence missions. Once the KAL pilot was approached by U.S. intelligence, "he would probably have found it difficult" to decline the mission.

But a key question still remains, and Clubb asks it himself: "Are we to believe that American leaders are in fact capable of knowingly gambling with the lives of innocent people?"

The problem is that, although Clubb answers in the affirmative, he cites no evidence. He merely discusses what he calls "the larger significance" of the incident — namely, the fact that innocent people often have been used as pawns in the Cold War: servicemen during the atom bomb tests, mankind during the Cuban missile crisis. But this is like trying to prosecute a murder case by citing the FBI crime statistics.

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To his credit, Clubb is frank about his deductive line of reasoning, noting, at one point, that "we can't expect the U.S. National Security Agency to present us with a smoking gun." But then he lays on more innuendo: "Quite obviously, those responsible for operations of this sort do everything possible to cover their tracks."

Dallin's book is more valuable because it pushes beyond the spy scenarios and focuses attention on a far more critical — even frightening — issue: The way in which a tragic international incident can polarize two lethal adversaries at a time when lowered voices might be most beneficial for the common good. In essence, each side ascribed the most pernicious motives to the other.

President Reagan led the charge from Washington, declaring that the Soviets willfully murdered the civilian passengers. Yet, as Dallin points out, a subsequent review by U.S. intelligence concluded that, on the contrary, the Soviets didn't know their target carried civilians. The Soviets, Dallin says, botched the job. They *should* have been able to identify the plane, but failed to do so, and this is what frightens Dallin — the notion that war could be triggered not by malicious intent, but by incompetence.

In regard to the hard-line Soviet response to the tragedy — characterized by a military official's remark that 269 lives were minimal when compared with the 20 million Soviet lives lost in World War II — Dallin discusses the need of Soviet leaders to appear as infallible protectors against scheming foes in the West.

Each side, Dallin writes, revealed a "predisposition to impute ... hostile intent, subversion, or willful brutality to the adversary: a dangerous but rather characteristic practice." And it is this very practice that both Dallin and Clubb see as the most serious lesson of the KAL incident: In an age of hair-trigger international tension, we are all innocent passengers on a perilous flight, lacking adequate leverage over the pilots who are charting the course.

Dick Polman is an Inquirer staff writer who covered some of the early investigations into the KAL incident.